

Committee on Resources

Full Committee

Witness Statement

Testimony for the U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Resources

Field Hearing

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Presented by

Paul L. Davidson

Executive Director

Black Bear Conservation Committee

I would like to express my thanks to this committee for allowing me to give my thoughts on these very important legislative initiatives and thank Chairman Young and Congressman Miller for their leadership in working to fund a mechanism to conserve our nations natural heritage. My name is Paul Davidson and I will give the perspective of a biologist and conservationist (and a taxpayer) that has for the past twenty years worked on natural resource management issues.

I have had the privilege of working for an organization called the Black Bear Conservation Committee for the past seven and a half years. The Committee is a diverse coalition of interests representing conservation organizations, timber and agricultural interests, state and federal agencies, and several universities working to restore the threatened Louisiana black bear to its historic range in Louisiana, Mississippi, southern Arkansas, and east Texas. Our experience in working with the diverse stakeholders in the natural resource arena will influence my statements this morning.

Both H.R. 701, the "Conservation and Reinvestment Act of 1999" and H.R. 798, the "Permanent Protection for America's Resources 2000 Act" have the potential to rank with the

most important conservation initiatives in America's history.

I will start by stating that I have never seen the natural resource management community as excited about any proposed legislation as they seem to be about these. The possibility of a stable funding mechanism for the Land and Water Conservation Fund is a sound initiative that is long overdue. And as a native of Louisiana, I, as well as many others from this beautiful state, are tired of dealing with the negative environmental impacts of Outer Continental Shelf oil and gas operations so that places like Disneyworld can stay lit up like a Christmas tree. We deserve compensation and mitigation for these adverse impacts. It is only fitting that some of this money be used to mitigate some of the damage done to our coastline.

I am concerned about some of the possible restrictions associated with this funding. Prioritization of land acquisitions should be based on sound science, both biological and social, not politics. To restrict acquisition to land in and around existing federal properties will mean that many biologically, socially, and economically significant areas cannot be protected. We should work to get the most for our money, but with these restrictions, we will miss countless opportunities to get the best deals and protect the best habitat. Flexibility is essential, not restrictions.

We also need to be able to respond quickly when opportunities become available. We see numerous potential acquisition opportunities missed because the landowners are not able to wait two or three years for Congress to appropriate the money to buy their property.

Based on my experience with the federally listed Louisiana black bear, I am excited that we are finally looking at incentives for private landowners willing to manage for listed species. I think that we should also look at a mechanism to support those willing to enhance populations of "candidate species" as well. If we can do a better job of managing these species, populations will never get so low that they have to be listed. The lower the population, the more perilous the situation, and the less chance of recovery. The solution is to never allow the populations to get so low as to require listing. Incentives, especially in the South where 90% of the forested habitat is privately owned, can go a long way in taking the conflict and controversy out of endangered species issues.

In Northeast Louisiana, where there exists a population of black bears, landowners wishing to enroll their property in the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) are given extra points toward their ranking if their property is near habitat occupied by bears. The bear, even though it is federally listed, is perceived as an asset to the property owner. Landowners in that part of the state embrace our efforts to restore bear populations and are actively involved in our work.

By contrast, in south-central Louisiana, where another bear population exists, there is no real

need or incentive to enroll in WRP, so we have not been able to create a positive attitude associated with bears. Landowners have fears, and legitimate ones, of government regulation and have a total lack of trust in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Much of this lack of trust can be attributed to poor communication between agency personnel and the local communities.

Common sense should tell us that landowners are not going to protect something on their property if it is not in their best interest to do so. If there are incentives that make managing for a given species an asset to the individual landowners, I think that we will see attitudes change very quickly.

When Congress established the Wetland Reserve Program in the 1990 Farm Bill, it created an incentive for farmers to protect and restore farmed wetlands. Over 100,000 acres of non-productive farmland has been enrolled in WRP in Louisiana since 1992. This has all been planted back to trees. This acreage will serve the needs of wildlife, but will also have positive implications on water quality, groundwater recharge, will reduce soil erosion and non-point source runoff, and reduce maintenance costs for drainage projects. These young forests will become economically viable in the future and can be a source of sustainable income for the landowner. Taking this acreage out of agricultural production also gives greater stability to farm prices.

This is a great example of an incentive that has worked. It is popular with landowners, conservation and environmental interests, as well as financial institutions. It is a win-win scenario.

The same can be done with endangered and threatened species. We just need to provide the incentives for private landowners so that it is in their best interest to protect these species. This will be a habitat issue. For example, the federally listed red-cockaded woodpecker prefers longleaf pine forests with mature trees that are 80 years old or older. Less than four percent of the historic longleaf pine ecosystem remains, so it is easy to understand why the woodpeckers are in trouble. Conversion of historic longleaf pine stands to faster growing slash and loblolly pines have eliminated woodpecker habitat. Incentives for landowners to plant and maintain longleaf pine stands will have a beneficial impact on woodpeckers, as well as other plants and animals indigenous to the longleaf pine ecosystem. This can also be economically advantageous to the landowner as longleaf pine timber is some of the most valuable in the southeastern United States.

The incentives can be in the form of tax breaks, mitigation points, cash payments or any other mechanism that provides the necessary incentive. I think that flexibility is the key. A wealthy individual may be more inclined to participate for a tax break. Others may want cash. Some may want to form a mitigation bank for the species and collect money from others who want to

convert habitat elsewhere.

With the proper incentives, I believe that the controversy over endangered and threatened species can be turned around. But the program has to be properly designed and, of course, funded appropriately.

The prospect of sending more money to the states for fish and wildlife conservation has agencies buzzing. It is exciting for all of us in the wildlife management business. But we need to be very careful in how this is done. In other words, I think a plan is needed.

State wildlife agencies currently get the bulk of their federal funding from Pittman-Robertson and Dingall-Johnson/Wallup-Breaux programs. These are dollars based on the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and are generally used to fund programs to improve hunting and fishing opportunities. This is as it should be.

But this new source of money comes from a broader base of taxpayers so should be used in ways to work for all the stakeholders. Many Americans spend millions of dollars annually in pursuit of non-consumptive outdoor experiences like bird watching, camping, hiking, canoeing, and other wildlife viewing. Their needs should be addressed as well.

One of the realities of dealing with state agencies is that every four years or so the leadership changes, depending on who gets elected governor. So the direction and leadership during one administration can change 180 degrees when a new administrator take charge. Programs initiated by one administration, which may have consumed millions of taxpayer dollars, can be completely derailed by the next administration focused in a different direction. This is not efficient use of taxpayers money.

For efficiency and accountability, we need a comprehensive plan from each state that shows how these monies will be spent. Those states with strong science-based, landscape scale plans, can identify areas that need protection and then can effectively prioritize projects and fund them in an way that gives the taxpayer the most for their money.

I think that each state agency needs a coordinator for this funding and that there needs to be a national network of these coordinators so that they can communicate with each other. There are many opportunities for major projects that cross political boundaries. Cooperative projects among two or more states should be promoted. Pooling resources should make for bigger and hopefully better projects.

There are ongoing programs in the Lower Mississippi River Valley that are focusing on the habitat needs of neo-tropical migratory birds and black bears and developing plans to enhance populations of both by partnering to promote habitat protection and enhancement, corridor

development, reduction of fragmentation, and coordinating activities over the entire ecosystem. Bears and songbirds require expansive areas of suitable habitat to thrive. Biologists can use them as a tool to focus on the landscape and address habitat needs throughout the ecosystem. All other species, game and non-game, plants and animals, as well as humans, are the beneficiaries. The needs of local communities are addressed as well as the needs of the species of focus. No plan will work without the human dimension factored into the equation.

State and federal agencies, conservation organizations, the academic community, as well as private landowners are all active participants. These pro-active efforts will bear fruit because the resources are being pooled and input is solicited from all the stakeholders. These types of projects should be encouraged with this new funding. This will require coordination and cooperation among the different state agencies but the potential rewards will be worth the effort.

There might even develop a sense of competition from the various regions of the country where partners in one region work to develop better and more beneficial projects than those in other regions. Cooperative projects in the South like the bear and songbird initiatives are cutting edge conservation biology, efforts that are as progressive as any conservation program in the world.

In conclusion, I believe that we have a historic opportunity in the 106th Congress to pass legislation to fund programs that will help protect our treasured natural heritage into the next century. If there is anything that I or my organization can do to work with committee staff to help move this process forward, please let us know.

Thank you again for your efforts and the opportunity to speak to you today.

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